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By Andrea Shalal-Esa, Reuters

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WASHINGTON

- The powerful head of the House of Representatives subcommittee that controls the purse strings of the Pentagon, said on Wednesday he was troubled by ebbing support for defense from fellow lawmakers.

Representative John Murtha, chairman of the defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, told reporters there was no question that defense spending was going to decline in coming years, but the country faced new threats that needed to be addressed.

He cited a "sea change" in support for defense among U.S. lawmakers, saying the recent supplemental war spending bill for fiscal 2009 nearly failed, and would not have passed without strong intervention by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"Defense is going to start to go down. There's no

question about it. The public has lost interest," the Democrat from Pennsylvania said.

"You're going to see a change, a sea change. I'm surprised myself at how little interest there is in what's going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, and yet we've got troops deployed."

Murtha said the U.S. House nearly did not pass the \$106-billion bill to pay for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, a measure that garnered only five Republican votes and had 32 Democrats voting against it.

"When I see that many people voting against a war supplemental it worries me and it makes me think we've got a real problem here," Murtha said.

Murtha said he met with Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Tuesday and the two men agreed that the biggest threat to the United States at the moment was the growing influence of the Taliban in Pakistan.

"Gates and I both agree that Pakistan is the biggest single threat to the United States. Why? Because there's nuclear weapons there and the country's not stable. We don't know what might happen in Pakistan," Murtha said.

Murtha said he believed U.S. lawmakers were skeptical about President Barack Obama's plan to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan, and would begin to object more strenuously if the situation there did not improve within a year.

Murtha also expressed concerns about potential conflicts in the future with China over world energy supplies, and said it would be good to have Japan operating its own F-22 fighter jets, if that became an issue.

Lawmakers are considering lifting a ban on exports of the F-22, the top U.S. air superiority fighter built by Lockheed Martin Corp to allow Japan to buy 40 to 60 planes.

He questioned the administration's decision to halt production of the F-22 and said he was considering a measure to add funding for 20 more planes to the fiscal 2010 budget, especially given current maintenance issues with the fighter.

He said he still needed to discuss the issue with other subcommittee members, and much would depend on threat assessments, as well as news about the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, also run by Lockheed.

Murtha also said more funding would definitely be added for Boeing Co built F/A-18s to bridge the Navy's expected shortfall of strike fighters, but said details were still being worked out.

"If we don't build F-22s, and the maintenance problems continue to be as severe as they are, that means we wouldn't have F-22s available if something happened," he said, noting that maintenance costs currently amounted to \$50,000 an hour.

Any exports would begin only in two to three years, and their cost would rise sharply if U.S. production ended before that, Murtha said.

He also cited developmental problems with the F-35, and said the House might not fund all 30 planes sought by the Pentagon in fiscal 2010, at least until the plane had come further through the testing process.